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ABSTRACT

The recent dissolution of many FLES programs throughout the nation is seen as a trend which is directly related to the quality of the instructional program offered. Consequently, the author lists general criteria to determine standards of excellence in FLES programs and proposes specific constraints to be observed in the development of new FLES programs. An experimental program in Bellevue, Washington is examined in which the central focus of the program is to teach toward the affective domain. Reasons for the success of the experiment are analyzed and recommended for adaptation in school districts where FLES is being introduced into the curriculum. (RL)

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QUALITY FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

by

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I must begin by expressing a great deal of apprehension about the title of this paper and my own qualifications for speaking or writing about it. There has been so much written on the subject, so many programs described as meeting criteria of excellence, and so few programs that have survived. Considering my own role as a coordinator of a now-defunct program that I considered to be one of the best, perhaps I am better equipped to speak to the subject of "How to construct a good junior high program from the ashes of FLES" or "What to do with FLES teachers when the program dies."

There are several things I am not going to do--in addition to not speaking on the subjects I facetiously mentioned above. I am not going to give a rationale for FLES. We all know it by heart. I am not going to review the literature on FLES. Each new article on FLES tends to be a review of what has been said. I am not going to include a lengthy bibliography, though I shall include three items that do provide a few new ideas and a large bibliography. I am not going to honor other writers with quotations. After the last fifteen

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hectic years, it is no longer possible to tell whose idea was original. I am sure many FLES experts will recognize my ideas as paraphrases of their own.

I am going to do three things: I shall define the terms "quality" and "FLES" so that we know what we are talking about. I shall discuss some constraints to excellence that have been too frequently overlooked in the past. And I shall set up some hypothetical case studies to illustrate as concretely as possible what I am talking about.

Here are my three bibliographical references:

1. The first edition of the Britannica Review of Foreign Language Education, edited by Emma Birkmaier. Not only is there an extensive annotated bibliography, but there are valuable articles. I especially recommend Chapter 6, which includes a review of recent trends in FLES, and Chapter 3, which deals with teaching culture.

2. New Dimensions in the Teaching of FLES, edited by Virginia Garibaldi Allen and André Paquette, is a report on an invitational conference devoted to an examination of the place of FLES in the total elementary school curriculum.

3. Several ERIC Focus Reports, with special attention to numbers 2, 3, 6, 9, 12, and 16.

All the items listed above are available from the Materials Center of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 62 Fifth Avenue, New York 10011.

Focus Report 16 is entitled FLES: Types of Programs. In it I say that FLES is an umbrella term which covers any FL instruction, offered by any certified teacher or paraprofessional--regardless of training--either in person or by means of any audio-visual medium, using any kind of teaching materials--commercially or locally prepared--at any grade level under secondary school. I am still quite comfortable with that definition. If FLES defies more precise definition, it also defies prescription, which means that this paper cannot include a list of musts for all programs;

How then can one speak of "quality instruction?" The answer is quite simple. Quality instruction is instruction that achieves the goals it is intended to achieve.

Let me summarize to this point. In this paper I am not excluding any type of foreign language instruction that is conducted in any elementary school, and I am not equating quality with dollars spent, with amount of instructional time allocated, with proficiency of teachers in terms of linguistic or cultural sophistication, or with excellence of the materials used. If I may make a final reference to my own Focus Report, I may be able to help you understand why I feel it is necessary to be so all-inclusive. In it I point out that whereas the first three years of FL instruction in the secondary schools has been relatively standardized, there are great differences among FLES programs as related to the teacher, materials used, time allocated, and students included. It may be of some consolation to FLES teachers to

note that the recent drive for individualization of instruction in the secondary schools is adding diversity, lessening standardization, and consequently bringing many secondary school programs more into line with FLES programs than they have been in the past.

In spite of the variety of plans for conducting foreign language instruction in elementary schools, there are indications of excellence that must be considered:

1. A quality instructional program will be built around a number of goals stated in terms of what students are going to know and how they are going to feel at the end of the instructional period.

2. There will be a system for evaluation which will allow students, teachers, or administrators to determine whether the goals are being achieved.

3. Learning materials and activities will be designed specifically to achieve the stated goals.

4. Teachers will understand the goals, believe in them, and enjoy planning for and being involved in goal-related activities.

5. Finally, there will be a plan for adjusting either the goals or the instructional program in order to increase their compatibility.

It should be evident that the indicators of quality listed above are not limited to FLES. They may apply to any instructional program. The fact that they are not often considered by our colleagues in other disciplines is no excuse for our ignoring them. FLES teachers

may need to be just a little better than their colleagues if they are to stay healthy.

I made the indicators of quality instruction quite general. On the other hand, constraints that any curriculum planner has to consider can be stated very specifically. They need to be considered as FLES programs are being planned. Where they have not been, there is not quality instruction except by accident. Directors of FLES programs that have been constructed on the sands of popular national whims may still be able to save their programs by considering local constraints and making proper changes before it is too late.

CONSTRAINT 1: The community. What are the characteristics of the children? How are they influenced by the activities and prejudices of their parents and friends? What are their general aspirations for the future?

CONSTRAINT 2: The school. What are the physical advantages and limitations? What are the limitations in terms of grouping of students and allocation of time for different kinds of instruction during the day?

CONSTRAINT 3: The total curriculum. What are elements in the material presented by other teachers that could be reinforced by FLES instruction? Do activities planned for other subjects tend to be teacher-dominated, or are students encouraged to work by themselves or in small groups most of the time?

CONSTRAINT 4: Money. How much can the community afford to

pay for quality FLES instruction? Is money available from other sources?

CONSTRAINT 5: FLES instructional source. Who will present the material?

CONSTRAINT 6: FLES instructional time. How much time can be devoted to the FLES program?

CONSTRAINT 7: Ratio of students to the instructional source. Will there be a person involved in the instruction? If so, for how many students will he be responsible? Will the teacher be responsible for one school or for several?

CONSTRAINT 8: Quality of the instructional source. Regardless of whether the source is television, a set of records and filmstrips, a live teacher, or some combination, the same criteria may apply. Is the quality of the language acceptable? Is there adequate flexibility to meet the shifting instructional needs of a modern elementary school? Is there sufficient quality and flexibility to adjust teaching procedures as necessary to meet changed or adjusted instructional goals?

Any educator who has had experience with FLES will think of more constraints to quality instruction. The eight listed above will serve the purpose for this paper. Hopefully their full significance will be made more understandable by a few actual and hypothetical case studies.

I shall begin with a true story which had a happy ending and

met my personal standards for quality. The October, 1970, issue of the Foreign Language Annals carried a story by Helen Carney of her efforts to publicize foreign language instruction in Tulsa, Oklahoma, by using high school students for instruction in some elementary schools. The article caught the attention of some FL teachers in Bellevue, Washington. I got additional information from Mrs. Carney, and we conducted an experimental program in Bellevue. I want to describe our experience because it illustrates what I am talking about in this paper better than anything I have done.

Bellevue is a suburb of Seattle with a high incidence of college-bound students and a low incidence of contact with non-Anglo ethnic groups. During the twelve years of Spanish instruction in the elementary schools, there were many positive and some negative feelings developed. Only one year had passed since the FLES program was discontinued, so memories were keen.

For our experiment, we selected a high school where teachers had indicated the original interest in the article by Helen Carney and an elementary school which was nearby. Teachers at the elementary school were not interested unless students could be given a choice of whether they would participate, and only if students had a choice of languages. The students in grades 5 and 6 of the elementary school move from teacher to teacher during the day as they are grouped for instruction in the various subjects according to their abilities and interests. There were six groups. Of the students in those groups,

156 elected to participate in the program and about ten elected to go to the library. Some who originally went to the library later joined one or another of the language groups. None of the language students left the program. There were two groups each of French and German, and one group each of Russian and Spanish. Instruction was conducted by students in "advanced" language classes. A team of high school students was assigned for each elementary room, and from four to six elementary children were assigned to each member of the team. One high school teacher and I coordinated the program, but all high school FL teachers acted as resource people for the high school students as they planned their lessons. There was one 30-minute lesson a week for six weeks.

Our objectives had more to do with the affective than with the cognitive domain. We knew that our "teachers" would make mistakes of a pedagogical and a grammatical nature, but we were convinced that any negative effects on the elementary children would be minor. We had some specific hopes and expectations for students from the high school as well as the elementary school pupils.

1. Most high school students would demonstrate their interest in the program by attending planning sessions, by preparing their lessons carefully, by going to their language teachers for help, and by expressing a desire to be involved another year in a similar program. That objective was achieved on all counts.

2. High school students would indicate by their comments and

questions in planning sessions that they had gained insights into language learning problems and processes. This was perhaps our greatest contribution to our "teachers."

3. Elementary teachers would never flag in their support of the program. We achieved this goal so well that we were forced to add a fourth grade to our program. Teachers have already requested that we repeat the program this year. This success is especially significant since the staff at that elementary school was not one of the enthusiastic staffs when we had a more formal FLES program.

4. Elementary children would demonstrate their enthusiasm for their program by staying with the program--though they knew they could drop out at any time, by requesting a repeat performance another year, and by cooperating with their teachers. We rated A on the first two parts of this objective, and B on the last part. We learned from our experience that greater care should be taken in the grouping of students. In other words, discipline problems were not totally eliminated, though there never was cause for great alarm.

5. Elementary children would demonstrate their ability to use their foreign language in their conversations with their classroom teachers and would be made aware of languages by having some exposure to the languages being learned by other children. The latter part of this objective was perhaps our greatest contribution to our children. They heard words in French, German, Russian, and Spanish, regardless of the language they were studying, and they heard those

words from the greatest salesmen in the world--students happily involved in learning.

Is it fair to refer to our modest program as a FLES program? It fits my definition, and more importantly, its contribution was significant. The only cost was for a bus that made six round trips of three miles each and a driver who was paid for six hours labor.

Today it must be obvious to FLES enthusiasts that there are many reasons for including foreign language instruction in the elementary schools, of which language proficiency is only one. Where is the hardy soul today who would call for twenty minutes of daily instruction for the primary years and thirty minutes during the intermediate years and predict that bilingualism will result? If you have no memory of such a thing ever happening, then I congratulate you on your youth. On the other hand, our contribution to children's awareness of other cultural patterns and other languages has always been a strong claim. We have gained a lot of sophistication in the stating of our objectives according to Magerian principles; I am not so sure we have gained so much in our ability to relate the goals to the constraints that exist in a given situation. Here are two case studies to illustrate what I mean.

District A has a FLES program that is carefully designed to meet linguistic goals. All instruction is by fluent language teachers, and students are able to go into continuing classes when they reach junior high. There are not many people in District A who speak

the language taught in the FLES program, and most parents and school administrators are satisfied with the results.

In most of the schools of District A, instruction in other subjects is quite structured, and students adjust readily to the teacher-dominated instruction during their FLES period. In a few of the schools, there are innovative programs being conducted, sometimes with several classes in a single large room without inside walls. In those schools, students are not accustomed to receiving instruction in a traditional classroom setting. Teachers of those buildings work a lot together, and they are accustomed to being involved in the planning of all activities that go on during the day. They are proud of the fact that they are ready at a moment's notice to show a film that seems appropriate, to leave the classroom for a trip to the playground or a nearby park, to release students who want to go to another part of the school for some purpose, or to allow students to dream for an hour or so. Those teachers resent the intrusion of a team of FLES specialists at regularly-scheduled times who operate according to a set of principles that are foreign to the philosophy as well as the language of the school. The resentment of the classroom teachers is at least equaled by the resentment of the FLES teachers who have to run from the previous school to their car and risk a speeding ticket in order to arrive on time, only to find quite frequently that their program for the day has been pre-empted by a flower that just bloomed or a tree the wind blew down in the neighborhood.

Is there quality instruction in District A? Both yes and no. For most of the children in most of the schools, all goes well. For some of the students in all the schools and all the students in some of the schools, the objectives are too restrictive. There is a serious doubt that the situation can be remedied. Money being spent for specialists has been justified on the basis of special language learning abilities that children have, and the junior high program has been designed to help students benefit from their FLES instruction. The program has become beautifully standardized, and as a result incapable of adjusting to non-standard situations. Much of the planning time by teachers in the non-standard school is spent in trying to figure out ways to meet objectives they have for their students. Here are a few of those goals:

1. Students will be able to discuss how environment is changed by rapid population growth and density, by changes in land use, by communications systems, by economics, by technology, by architecture, by transportation, by housing, by new types of agriculture, by new businesses, by food processing, and by pollution.

2. Students will develop an ability to work together on projects, to build friendships, to resolve conflicts, to show compassion for other people, to accept different cultural patterns and life styles, and to understand their own feelings toward others.

Those teachers recognize that there is no place in the FLES program for such goals.

District B is smaller than District A. District B is located

in a farming area. There have been problems recently. There are many Chicano students who have become militant. As some Anglo students have started joining the cause of the Chicano students, others have become stronger in their opposition. Parents are bewildered. There is no FLES program in District B, and there never has been. District B has limited financial resources.

Is there a possible benefit from a FLES program in District B? Could it be sold to the community? Where would one begin?

The last question suggests that there is someone who might think of language work at the elementary school level as one way of bridging communication gaps for the future high school students. There are several possible beginning points in a democratic society: a group of parents, an elementary school teacher, a secondary school FL teacher, an elementary school principal, a central office administrator, or a board member. Before any program begins in District B, all those mentioned above should be involved. Hopefully they will decide that the important goals for a Spanish FLES program will be both cultural and linguistic, and even more importantly that both the cultural and linguistic goals will be closely related to the language and culture of the Chicanos in the District.

In District B it would not be surprising to find that there is a bilingual teacher in one of the elementary schools. There is probably at least one Chicano, and there may well be an Anglo who came to District B because of a special interest in the problems. I hope no

one will jump to the conclusion that when such a person is found the problem is resolved. Let's look just a little more closely.

Our FLES teacher needs to have more than fluency in English and Spanish. He needs more than an intellectual interest in the problems of the community. District B does not need another militant for either side. Neither does it need a weak teacher.

If I were an administrator in District B, I would begin by meeting with groups of parents, both Anglos and Chicanos, to discuss with them ways that their children might gain a greater understanding of each other. I would hope to find a teacher in one of the schools with the qualities to start a program, and I would include him in the meetings with parents. I would look for a teacher with fluency in both languages, with superior ability in classroom management, with superior ability to organize imaginative activities for children, with the ability to act as a leader of other teachers, and with a good basic understanding of the community. I might settle for less than the ideal, but I would not want to give in on many counts. If one were not available in the district, I would start recruiting. Before beginning plans for any actual instruction, I would want to see the potential teacher work with children from both groups, and I would want him to visit programs similar to one being planned for District B.

Barring the loss of a special levy, I would bet on community support for the cost of one teacher with an extended contract and a

few hundred dollars for materials. Let me play the role of an administrator in District B and develop a hypothetical time line of events leading to the beginning of a FLES program that might have some chance to provide quality instruction.

September 15, 1971: Parents at the first PTA meeting of an elementary school suggest that some effort should be made to bring children closer together in their understanding of each other by conducting some instruction in both languages. The principal and two parents are appointed to look into possibilities.

October 15: The committee has met several times, has done some preliminary reading, and has brought the problem to the central office with a request for action as soon as possible. I request to meet with different groups of parents.

December 1: I have met with the committee and several groups of parents and the teachers of several elementary schools. We have arrived at some idea of what we would like to see transpire. We have also met with a specialist from the state office. I have been given clearance by the superintendent to look for a likely teacher.

January 15: Three potential teachers have been identified in the district. A selection committee representing parents, elementary teachers, and elementary principals has been formed. All three are included on a committee to begin meeting with parents and teachers and start planning a curriculum. A special grant from the state office makes it possible to give the potential teachers some

released time for their work.

March 1: The teacher has been selected. With help from the state office, federal funds have been made available to help out. The teacher will be taken from the classroom after Spring vacation and will spend the balance of the year studying problems and planning solutions. Much of his time will be spent as an observer in elementary school classrooms. He will also be employed for two months during the summer, and he will spend much of that time visiting farms and food processing plants where many of the Chicanos work and where many of the prejudices develop. He will conduct his program in one school only during the first year.

August 15: The teacher will put final touches to plans for a two-day pre-school workshop for teachers in the building in which he will work. At the workshop, he will present a curriculum for language instruction that has been deliberately built around the kinds of activities that are common to that school. Though he will be the FLES teacher, he will operate as a full member of the school staff, participating in all meetings and taking his turn with such duties as school ground patrol.

Perhaps his most important goal, though it is not stated in his job description, will be to get the support of the teachers. With their support and imagination, he will continue to find ways to relate language work to many other parts of the curriculum.

I shall not presume to list specific goals. Suffice it to say

that after several weeks of meetings and study, planners should understand local problems and constraints. Now if the excitement of innovation and a couple minor grants have not turned their heads, perhaps they will have spelled out realizable goals and ways of measuring their success. They should be ready to start actual instruction with some assurance of quality.

I shall end this paper by trying to state in a few sentences all that I have said so far.

Quality instruction is not the same for District A as it is for District B. Teachers who are right for one district are not necessarily right for another. Standards of excellence in language performance that are appropriate for one district are not necessarily appropriate for another.

FLES materials that are acceptable in one program may be wrong for another. Quality instruction has to be measured according to the goals that have been set for the program. The experiences of the last decade have proven the futility of using the same yard stick for all programs or of prescribing the same program for all schools.

This is not to say that anything goes. On the contrary, never has there been a greater need for intellectual toughness and integrity. The results of broken promises based on romantic goals quoted from the publications of band-wagon enthusiasts are in evidence across the nation in the form of little piles of ashes, the remains of non-quality foreign language instruction in elementary schools.